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Statement submitted by Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

From the classroom to the workplace — positioning women for decent work in the knowledge economy

Introduction

Defining the broad context of gender and development

1. All countries of the world today are faced with the challenge of achieving sustainable economic growth in a globalizing world where technological and scientific knowledge are essential to progress. But given global and national inequities, they are inevitably approaching the challenges from very different starting points. In particular, in many countries, persistent gender inequalities in educational systems, in the school-to-work transition, and in working life need to be addressed. It is for this reason that the global trade union movement, represented at the Commission on the Status of Women by Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, is pleased to participate in the critical policy dialogue before its fifty-fifth session, focusing on the linkages between education and training, including in science and technology, and the world of work.

2. Investment in all quality public services is a key driver of development. As such, trade unions have grave concerns with the reductions to budgets supporting public services that Governments have undertaken in response to the current economic crisis. These cuts are having a negative impact on the provision of quality public services, which are central to eradicating poverty through the delivery of health care, education, and decent work for women. Investments in the public sector and in the social ministries charged with development, labour and gender equality should be increased not decreased in a time of crisis, if the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals are to be achieved.

3. Given the importance of poverty eradication and sustainable development, broadly defined, for economic and social progress, trade unions take the view that the topic of science and technology for women's employment, needs to be analysed in the broader context of the structured inequalities that deny women in different countries and economic sectors the opportunity to participate fully in and benefit from economic life. It should be recognized that the education of girls is of critical importance for the development of societies. The evidence base shows clearly that exclusions and discriminations begin early, often in the classroom or through denial of access to it. They are then perpetuated and exacerbated along the continuum from school to working life. Multiple dimensions compounding gender discrimination include economic status, geographic location, lack of access to quality public services, ethnicity and disability.

4. In many developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, children are failing to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills at the end of their primary school years. These countries are falling short of Education for All and Millennium Development Goals targets relative to girls graduating from primary school. Admittedly, strategies to improve access to education have been put in place. These

* Issued without formal editing.

have resulted in increased enrolment numbers for girls, and progress towards gender parity in primary school completion. High dropout rates are still prevalent, however, and they are higher for girls in a number of developing countries. Only 60 per cent of all children in sub-Saharan Africa complete primary school, with girls further behind than boys, showing a 55 per cent figure for primary school completion. It has been suggested that part of that differential can be explained by user fees. Where these are in place, parents are more motivated to spend their limited resources on their sons' education rather than on their daughters', since, in their view, investment in the latter will be reaped, not by them, but by their in-laws.

Laying the foundation for gender-inclusive approaches at all educational levels

5. Dropout rates are clearly associated with poverty, as is the related phenomenon of child labour, where girls are severely affected. In India, for example, 96 per cent of child labourers live in households where per capita income is less than $2 per day, and young girls account for 42 per cent of all children in employment. Girls face additional challenges of vulnerable, at-risk employment in the entertainment industry where they are victims of trafficking, or as domestic workers, where the majority of girls trapped in abusive child labour are to be found. Structured discriminations also affect the girl child in rural areas, given that some 70 per cent of poor women live in rural areas and are engaged in low wage employment as own-account workers or as workers on family farms, or in the informal economy. They can ill afford to keep their children at school, and once again prefer the girl child as family help.

6. Despite commendable progress in developing education systems and addressing gender disparities in line with the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals, the foregoing analysis shows that severe development challenges still need to be overcome. Addressing them in an adequate manner is critical for laying the foundation for progress with gender-inclusive education at all levels, including in science and technology. In addition, where satisfactory progress in science and technology is being made, gender disparities persist, and need to be addressed.

7. In some regions and countries, (Latin America and the Caribbean, and North Africa), girls and young women are showing good academic performance in science and technology at the secondary and tertiary levels, even outperforming boys and young men. However, statistics indicate that girls and women show a preference for the life sciences (medicine, biology, biochemistry), rather than for physics, engineering and computer sciences. A number of factors contribute to these choices: gender stereotyping of so-called male and female career paths, which is often reflected in teaching materials; a lack of support for programmes to tackle the gender stereotyping and segregation in education; and the lack of female role models for girls, both with respect to teachers of science and technology at all levels of education, as well as women who have pursued professional or managerial careers in the area of science and technology.

Academic achievement and professional advancement in science and technology — a mismatch

8. Where girls gain access, they achieve. Clearly, increasing numbers of women are completing university level programmes in science and technology and

engineering, but this is not being translated to equal career chances and salaries. After initial entry into science and technology fields, opportunities for career advancement are minimal, and retention is poor. A high level of vertical segregation has been noted, with women concentrated in the lower echelons of the occupational ladder, facing barriers that hinder advancement to senior research and managerial positions or professorships. Attrition rates for girls and women have been noted across the school-to-work continuum in science and technology fields, but are particularly marked in the university to work transition. There is clearly a mismatch between educational attainment for women on the one hand, and career advancement and job remuneration on the other, as compared with men; and pay inequity is also persistent.

9. The high attrition rates noted have been attributed to the fact that both classroom and work environments in the science and technology field are hostile to women, while they reward men's performance. Gender stereotypes about these being "masculine territory" help to sustain the gender unfriendliness with regard to women's pursuit of careers in these fields. In the scientific environment, the prevailing ethos rewards long hours of commitment to professional endeavours and publications. Without the necessary policies in place to encourage an equal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men, this represents a further barrier for women who must then combine professional with family responsibilities. Not only are women's roles in social reproduction and the care economy not recognized, women are actually penalized for their efforts to balance these roles with professional careers in the science and technology field.

A holistic approach

10. Denying women opportunities for full participation in the science and technology fields results in the loss of a valuable resource pool, much needed for contributing to the shaping of a gender-inclusive, people-centred, knowledge economy; and it is a denial of women's fundamental rights. To be sustainable, policies that address this sphere of gender inequality must operate within a holistic policy framework geared to tackling the full range of development challenges and structured inequalities that impede the smooth transition from the classroom to a decent workplace.

11. Achieving quality education is essential. Policies for quality education need to be formulated along three major axes, and in a gender-inclusive way:

(a) Improving the educational curriculum and methodologies to make them relevant to the achievement of quality education for all, lifelong learning, and the world of work; ensuring an adequate supply of textbooks and materials; removing embedded gender stereotypes; organizing gender-sensitive training for teachers;

(b) Improving the physical and material environment in terms of user-friendly buildings which ensure they are safe spaces for girls, including sanitary facilities; ensuring an adequate supply of technical and information technology equipment, and making them accessible and attractive to girls;

(c) Improving the cadre of teachers in quantity and quality through adequate recruitment, induction, and retention strategies, including pre- and in-service training, opportunities for professional development and advancement, adequate remuneration; removing pay inequity.

12. Moreover, there is a need for policies, programmes and campaigns geared to raising awareness and combating negative stereotypes, and encouraging girls to embark on all fields of study, including science and technology.

Creating an enabling environment in support of women's access to full employment and decent work

13. Access to quality public services, whether in health and social care, water and sanitation, electricity and fuel, public administration, vocational training and further education, is fundamental to women's access to full employment and decent work. An unequal distribution of household and care responsibilities between women and men continues to limit women's full participation in labour markets and in decent work that is permanent, and secure. Gender segregation further limits women's full participation in labour markets. Women — and in particular young women — are especially vulnerable to "precarious" employment that is temporary or casual, generally low-paid, and with little or no social protection. Policy measures aimed at ensuring women's access to full employment and decent work must address these prevailing decent work deficits.

Conclusions

Applying a comprehensive policy and normative framework

14. The policy and normative framework exists to underpin such an enabling environment so it delivers on real gender equality. It must now be applied. The framework consists notably of:

(d) The Beijing Platform for Action, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

(e) Key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions: the Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (No. 100), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).

15. Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International call on Member States at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to introduce and strengthen policy interventions within this policy and normative framework, geared to overcoming the structured discriminations and barriers affecting the life chances of girls and women in terms of adequate education and training that prepare them and enhance their opportunities for full and productive employment and decent work. It is also important that policymakers establish consultative processes that allow for social dialogue with trade unions who, from their experience, can contribute greatly to the policymaking process that boosts the important nexus between education and training, and decent work. Collective bargaining should be used as a key instrument to promote gender equality outcomes such as pay equity, equal opportunity for professional advancement, maternity protection and the equal sharing of family responsibilities, as enshrined in the ILO conventions cited above.